

TRANSFORMERS AND TERRORISTS — THE USAGE OF MALAGAN MASKS ON TABAR, NEW IRELAND, PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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ABSTRACT

The role of masks in the malagan ritual traditions of Tabar is examined in using data recorded on Tabar in 1983–84 together with earlier records from the Notsi, Nalik, Kara and Mandak regions of mainland New Ireland. From this data it will be shown that individual malagan masks are used for specific roles in taking village society across liminal phases such as death and social dislocation. In addition it will be shown how the ritual cleaning function of some malagan masks subverts history and accelerates the process by which men are converted to ancestors and ancestors then to masalai geographic markers. It will then be proposed that malagan masks are elements of transformation within a ritual vocabulary.

KEYWORDS: Papua New Guinea, New Ireland, Tabar, malagan, mask, ritual, art.

INTRODUCTION

Masks have generally been regarded as part of northern New Ireland's malagan ritual material culture, but their position and functions within the total repertoire of malagan traditions have not been clearly theorized in the literature.

Despite the increasing number of studies on the subject, few have advanced the interpretation of masking activities associated with malagan ritual traditions. Early workers such as Bühler and Powdermaker gave vignettes of mask activity, but it was not until Lewis (1969) and Brouwer (1980) that the individuality of malagan masks and their roles was fully recognized. Development beyond this point has been largely unsuccessful, due in part to the myopic nature (Lewis 1988) of some of the studies.

Comparison of historical data derived from the mainland of New Ireland with that recorded from Tabar in 1982–84 has enabled the identification of a number of roles served by malagan masking activity. From this vantage point it became apparent that the predominant use of malagan masks is to transform individuals and society, within both ritual contexts and outside in the secular world. Masks are used at the final reunification of a village society broken by a death; and are used to transform deceased individuals into

clan ancestors. It appears that, as a consequence of their secular activity, malagan masks also transform clan ancestors into masalai boundary markers.

MALAGAN

Malagan ritual practices have been historically recorded from ten language groups in the north of New Ireland including the islands of Tabar and Lavongai or New Hanover (Helfrich 1973; Bodrogi 1987). Malagan is now extinct on Lavongai, and the remaining traditions in the rest of northern New Ireland are fragmentary. Off-shore Tabar, however, remains a reservoir of malagan traditions.

Malagan is not an homogeneous tradition, despite the coherence of the art works resulting from malagan ritual activity. Even the name varies in its scope from region to region. In the Mandak language the word *malagani* means "to write", or "to make a mark or an image on a plain surface" (Brouwer 1980:161). This concept apparently covers a wide range of artefacts, from ritual sculpture to masks to forms of behaviour associated with the ritual. However, *malagani* as a concept also includes fish traps and even typewriters, with the implication that, for the Mandak, any form of cultural activity could potentially be considered "malagan". On Tabar the term "to make a mark, to write" is *vataru*, quite distinct from *malangga*. *Bu*



Fig. 1. Mask *Matalala* following malagan operator Sola through Pekinberiu village during removal of taboos at *cukuavatir*, the penultimate commemorative ceremony. NGE 1983-4/31/8.

malangga refers to the contents of the group of 20 or so sub-traditions used to construct and display sculpture in honour of the dead. These contents include all sculpture and masks, as well as a number of social actions, songs, and dances.

Malagan on Tabar is a gestalt formed by at least twenty sub-traditions or “big-names” Each of these sub-traditions is transmitted to the next generation in *tabataba* (fragments or “strings”) consisting of the reproductive rights to ten or twelve individual malagan sculptures (see Gunn 1984, 1987). Elements of malagan are individually owned, the rights generally inherited either from within the clan from the mother’s brother, or from the father in the affinal clan.

Malagan balances marriage in Tabar’s matrilineal society. Traditional malagan ceremonial ritual is used to bury or to honour the dead in affinal clans, the clan of the wife or husband. Maintenance of bonds between intermarrying clans had real relevance in earlier times when bush villages relied on coastal villages for access to salt-water and fish; sometimes the coastal people also had need for shelter in the easily defended villages up in the karst hill tops. This honouring of the affinal dead bestowed prestige upon the feast-giver and was traditionally the main road to high status on Tabar.

The people of Tabar still use a relatively extensive malagan ritual vocabulary to cope with transition at society’s boundaries: when a living human becomes a dead ancestor, or where the fabric of society is torn by the death of a major member and must be re-woven. Briefly, the use of malagan on Tabar involves the following operations:

- a series of burial rites;
- a series of commemorative feasts to honour the dead;
- production and display of art works such as figures, carved boards, and other ritual objects in a strictly controlled setting;
- transmission from one generation to the next of the rights to own and operate malagan;
- separation of a community at the death of one of its members and a gradual reuniting of the community along evolved lines;
- use of masks for rites of social separation and reintegration;
- imposition and removal of taboos; the legitimation of land-use transactions;

- commitment of members of a community to work together on a project that would take several years to complete;
- use of masks and other techniques to raise funds and to publicise forthcoming malagan activity;
- acquisition, slaughtering, butchering, distribution, and public consumption of pigs.

MASKS IN MALAGAN

On Tabar today, rights to at least 60 different mask types are held by individual malagan owners. Most of these masks (*wanis*) are found in *Verim* (or *Varima*), one of twenty one more or less distinct sub-traditions. Other malagan sub-traditions such as *Kulepmu*, *Mandas*, *Malagacak* and *Marada* appear to utilize a static wooden head *kovkov* or a *ges* mask superimposed on a banana trunk body, rather than a masked man. However, as most large malagan ceremonies include a contribution from a *Verim* owner, few major ceremonies take place without the presence of at least a couple of *wanis* masks worn on the head of a man (they seem never to be worn by women).

Contrary to the impression given by Küchler (1987:241), a malagan mask emerges from the mask maker’s interpretation of the verbal description given by the owner, who may have last seen the design some thirty years earlier. Masks should, according to the local people, be made by a malagan carver *tunumar*. In practice, only the important and technically difficult masks such as *malaganivis* are made by the *tunumar*, a less important mask would be made by the person who would wear it. In common with all Tabar malagan sculpture, a mask should be manufactured as an exact replica of the design originally inherited, even though the transference took place decades earlier. The final shape of the mask, however, is strongly influenced by current notions of mask manufacture, both in materials and design. A *tunumar* works in a style that develops over many years of interpreting the malagan owners’ verbally given designs. Carving styles can be quite independent of the owner’s design of the malagan, as became apparent when a Simberi man asked two *tunumar* in 1982 to each make a *Tangala* figure from his *Turu* malagan set. The resulting figures (see Gunn 1984:Figs. 8,9) were accepted as belonging to the owner’s inherited rights, but it was a

reflection of the strength of the owner's character that the acceptance was passed without comment.

For the people of Tabar, a mask, in common with any artefact, has a specific reason for its existence. No man spends time and energy chopping wood and assembling resins, ochres, bush paints, and other ingredients for absolutely no reason. A mask has a *raison d'être*. Aspects of its character may be obsolete, in the sense that it may carry representations that no longer have any meaning, but in its entirety a mask has a purpose for its existence and that purpose becomes its meaning.

Meaning, in a mask used on Tabar today, is not located in an esoteric vocabulary comprising the patterns and symbolic referents found on the mask, nor is there much relevance found in the materials used in the construction of a mask, even though they may range to twenty or so components. For example, the mask *Kinikis*, used in Tatau village in 1982, had an oar on top, indicating a capsized canoe. But the commemorative ceremony in which this mask was used did not commemorate anyone lost at sea. The image was inherited, and was used because it had to be transmitted by public use and display to the next generation. The meaning of this mask, for the people using it, was found in its use.

Mask use in malagan of Tabar appears very similar to that recorded from the Notsi in 1952-54 by Phillip Lewis and from the Mandak in 1976-79 by Elisabeth Brouwer. This similarity is not very surprising, for it is due in large part to the wholesale importation of malagan traditions from Tabar to both the Notsi region (Lewis 1969:116) and to the Mandak (Brouwer 1980:220-235).

Masks on Tabar are predominantly used during two groupings of malagan ritual: *tatanua* — burial rites and the *aruaru* commemorative ceremonies.

1) *tatanua* are the rites of death and burial. White *tanua* masks signify the connection the dead man is making with the ancestral dead; black *tanua* masks sever the connection he had with the living.

White feather *tanua* masks, which on Tabar belong to the *Kulepmu* sub-traditions, are worn by men of the dead person's spouse's elan when they carry the coffin to the grave. When worn in this context, these *tanua* masks represent ancestral spirits at the

burial but do not represent the dead man's "soul" or "image"; this concept is carried by *marumarua* figure sculpture. Several months after the interment, the final ceremony of the burial sequence *tatanua* is held. It culminates with the wearing and final destruction of black bark *tanua* masks, marking the complete separation of the dead man from the living villagers. At this point he becomes an ancestor, and as such his relationship to living society becomes subject to negotiable memory.

Society is now freed of burial taboos, yet it remains socially shattered, for a major pivot point of the community has vanished. When alive, the dead person was a connection for cognates to visit, now there is merely an empty space. As if to emphasize the point, half the houses in the village have been broken and the inhabitants have gone to live elsewhere. Desolation is obvious.

It would appear that amongst the northern Mandak the ostensible role of *tatanua* may have changed from the representation of the spirit of particular deceased individuals to a more secular role. Brenda Clay's account of the *tatanua* masked dancing tradition in the northern Mandak region interpreted *tatanua* as a "kind of malagan", a masked dance that speaks for malagan, that honours a place where there has been a malagan, and is held only at hamlets in which there has been a malagan display in the past (Clay 1987:63-65). Early German ethnographic accounts (Peckel 1928, Bühler 1933) indicated that the word *tatanua* incorporated the local names or variants for "spirit" *tanua* (called *miteno*, *tatanua*, *tutanua* in various locations in northern New Ireland). Current northern Mandak concepts indicate that "the masked [*tatanua*] dancer is said 'to look just like a true man', but not to represent an individual or his spirit." (Clay 1987:66). Among the Nalik speakers to the north, Heintze's work indicates that "*marua* [masks] are true malagans, whereas the *tatanua* are only 'half a malagan'" (1987:51-2).

Some of this apparently changed role of *tatanua* may be due to the recent importation of masked malagan activities into a region which had none 70 years previously (see Krämer 1925). The adoption of a masking tradition from another area as a secular or semi-secular dance is quite common in New Ireland. On Tabar in 1984, for example

masked dances adopted from the Tolai of New Britain were used by children in formal dances in the village plaza immediately prior to the more traditional malagan activity.

2) *Aruaru* is a series of up to 12 malagan ceremonies operated in the name of several people that died a number of years previously. One function of this group of ceremonies is to acknowledge in public the reshaped and refocused society which evolved after the social vacuum created by death. When a leading person dies, several people then rise to attempt to fill the gap. The resultant struggle for succession polarises society and threatens to fragment it. This prolonged sequence of commemorative ceremonies becomes an ameliorating influence and is used to finally resolve the problems of succession by focussing on the next rising generation, the young people who inherit the malagan traditions.

The *aruaru* commemorative sequence of malagan ceremonies emphasises the production and transference of malagan sculpture in the name of the now distant dead. *Cirep*, the first ceremony of this commemorative sequence, has as its focal activity the ritualized transportation of a number of *saba* (*Alstonia villosa*) logs into the graveyard to be used later by the carvers to make *marumarua* images of the dead. Much of the ceremonial activity that occurs over the following few months is associated with feasts marking stages of the preparation of the malagan display house and the manufacture of malagan sculpture. Some of these ceremonies will involve the display of sculpture when a malagan owner feels that the time is right to transfer ownership of the sculpture to the next generation, but the majority of the malagan material is kept for the final major ceremonies of the *aruaru* sequence.

At various stages of the *aruaru* sequence, groups of masked men emerge from the graveyard to destroy property of the dead person's clan. This destruction is more representative than total and is spoken of as "cleaning the place". The clan's gardens would be raided by masked axemen and gathered food is taken back to the graveyard. Clan houses would be speared and have stones hurled at them, senior clansmen would be threatened with spears and insulted. The masked men act angry, as though they are ready for a fight, ready to kill

a man. They speak of "killing the possessions of the dead man". These attacks are received with good humour, for they are perceived as part of the re-unification of the broken village. The possessions of the dead person which are part of living society are destroyed in his name, ritually removed from the dead man's hand to become the property of the living. His gardens now belong to those who took them over; his family houses are destroyed completely and his men's house is freed of his influence. As is the case with all ritual involving the dead in Tabar society, the masks used in these cleansing activities are worn by men of the affinal clans, those related by marriage to the dead person's clan.

The final phases in the erasure of the dead person's social existence occurs during *cukuavatir* (the erection and display of malagan sculpture), the penultimate public ceremony of the *aruaru* sequence. Two primary roles are performed by masks during this final ritualized social cleansing: opening the village for the masked cleaners to convert it to a non-tabooed state (see Fig. 1); and the removal of taboos on the graveyard area (see Frontispiece D). This latter taboo removal permits the temporary entry of women to the graveyard for the public display of malagan sculpture, indicating a freedom from the influence of the dead. Breaching each of these two realms (public village world and men's private graveyard world) is considered a separate activity and different masks are used for each task, although they may be worn consecutively by the one man.

After the graveyard is opened by the most senior mask type (*malaganivis*) worn by an actor, malagan sculpture and other art works are then hung for display in the towering malagan display house. Old traditional songs are sung for each malagan sub-tradition represented. To conclude *cukuavatir* a group of cleaning masks emerges from behind the malagan house in the graveyard to run into the village plaza and wreak final havoc amongst the clans-people and the property of the dead. Concluding this activity, the masked cleaners go to a rope strung up across the centre of the plaza joining the village to the graveyard and cut the rope into pieces, freeing the people from their dead.

Much prestige is at stake in a large series of ceremonies, so the operators will use groups

of masked men to raise regional awareness of the ensuing malagan ceremonies. Men dress in red tops with green fibre decoration, wearing on their heads the characteristic pointed masks denoting the *ges*, legendary killers that would travel from one village to another, marauding and desecrating, holding any victim's liver in their mouths. Today, groups of *ges* may set out from two of the villages involved in a major malagan ceremony and stage a fight on neutral ground. Once a wound is sustained the two gangs return to their respective graveyards, satisfied with the ensuing publicity.

Ges are similar to the cleaners in their roles as the breakers of the continuity of profane life but differ from them in a number of ways. *Ges* have their own mythic charter to follow and are also widely recognized on the mainland as a separate malagan element (see Heintze 1987:43-44; Brouwer 1980). *Ges* is most often reported as a kind of bush spirit, known for anger and violence. In the Notsi area the *ges* is reported to be the spirit double of a living person, dwelling on the clan land and dying with its human counterpart (Powdermaker 1933, Heintze 1987). Interestingly, *ges* are often portrayed as figures and wooden heads as well as acted masks. *Pi* masks were recorded among Notsi by Lewis (1969:120) and on Tabar by Gunn in 1984, and as *Limipi* among the Mandak by Brouwer (1980). This mask is most often referred to as *dcaf* or *mad*. With the Notsi and on Tabar this mask is associated with major events of discontinuity, hurling missiles in the direction of change: into the men's house at the beginning of circumcision confinement, out of the men's house into the public arena at the end of confinement.

Along with this initial activity of the *ges*, the *soser* fund-raising masks would become active, for operating a series of malagan ceremonies is very expensive. Pigs are pledged, then fed and cared for tenderly by those with obligations to discharge. Services of performers, carvers, and other workers are paid for with *rea* (lengths of traditional shell valuables), with tobacco, and with betel nut. To obtain additional shell currency, lime, dogs' teeth, money, and other essentials necessary for the operation of a good ceremony, this happy gang of extortionists swings into action. Alfred Bühler noted the activities of a similar gang wearing both wooden and bark

masks at Tatau village in 1932 (Bühler 1933:249-50). This class of masks has been described from both the Notsi (Lewis 1969) and the Mandak (Brouwer 1980). Their "ceremonial terrorist nature" (Lewis 1969:135) is so different to those of the taboo removing masks that Lewis was prompted to speculate that there is in northern New Ireland "a hitherto unreported kind of secret society activity" (ibid.:135).

The techniques of the fund-raisers are varied but quite rigorously prescribed by the rules of each mask. For example the mask *Cikcikkelegum* acts at night and spears the sides of houses when people are asleep. When this mask is active, people move their beds to the centre of the house. *Gesnevnev* is a type of *ges* mask who carries a spear and *lengleng* shell rattle, extorting money when he finds people defecating in the bush. *Matnonnoc* (*Gegeh-pulel* to the Notsi, *Karunu* to the Mandak) begs money and collects food by crouching in the doorway of people's houses. He holds *lengleng* in one hand and a basket in the other and uses a wooden hook to pull at the sago leaf roof laths, people give money to preserve the integrity of their houses. *Nocmuc* (probably *Tuhteltutur* to the Notsi, *Le Vat Bobonu* to the Mandak) acts similarly, sitting in front of a family house holding a spear on his shoulder; women give him money. *Susuruvana* (*Sulsulanua* to the Notsi, *Kokotosunu* to the Mandak) is more threatening, this mask goes about with a lighted bundle of coconut fronds and threatens to burn a house if not funded. *Tonokukkuc* (*Puhpor* to the Notsi, *Le Vat-Tongan* to the Mandak) goes into the men's house at night and tickles men in the ribs with a knife.

MASKS AS TRANSFORMERS AND THE SUBVERTERS OF HISTORY

The vast majority of malagan masks (*wanis*) on the Tabar Islands are part of the *Verim* group of malagan sub-traditions and are used for quite specific purposes during burial and at later commemorative ceremonies for the dead. Many of the roles of these masks are concerned with the rites of social separation and reintegration, following the death of a significant person within village society. Most senior amongst the masks are those involved with the removal of taboos from the graveyard at the conclusion

of the commemorative malagan series, indicating freedom from the influence of the dead. Less important are those used to release the village and other public spaces from the socially dislocating effects of a death. Other masks are used as guards for senior masks, as cleaners to remove the presence of the dead from the village, to act as fund-raisers, and as agents for publicity.

From the usage presented above there appears to be at least three classes of transformer mask:

1. *tanua* masks: both white feather and black bark, are worn by men of the affinal clans to represent ancestral spirits during the *tutanua* group of burial ceremonies. This class of masks is used as a connection between the living with the dead, transforming individual corpses into subclan ancestors. As such these highly symbolic referents are considered extremely contagious and are either burnt or placed in the grave with the corpse.

2. taboo removers: the *malaganivis* major masks worn by men to open the graveyard do not transform individual men but instead are used to repair society. Men carry the masks and as actors operate the roles of taboo removal for the mask. They transform society by removing taboos from the graveyard, in effect negating the influence of the dead on society. Women and children can then temporarily enter the malagan area and graveyard to view the final malagan display. The clans-people of the dead now return to normal life. This class of mask belongs to the malagan ritual as operated by living men. As such, the mask is placed after use in its own display house in the public part of the graveyard. There it becomes an art object to be admired for its beauty or for its correctness. Masks used to free the public village of taboos do not transform the actors, but instead assist social transition by taking society across the boundary separating unresolved death from social reunification.

3. the destroyers — cleaners, *ges* and *pi*: these masks transform society by removing evidence of personal history, leaving room open for an ancestor's life to become negotiable. On Tabar, and with both the Notsi and Mandak of the mainland, the cleaners take two forms: those that attack people, houses, gardens and fruiting trees; and those that solicit funds by threatening houses.

Ges and *pi* operate in an atmosphere of potential violence. Some of their names may appear benign, but their work with spear, axe, knife and stone is not. As social transformers they are similar to the *malaganivis* taboo lifters but, rather than removing barriers to integration, this group erases by destruction. They are men wearing masks as agents, transforming village society by destroying evidence of the dead. They remove a person's relics, his personal history, and relegate him to the much more debateable position of ancestor.

Malagan's cleaners, the masked destroyers, choppers of fertile trees and wreckers of houses, neatly outline the distinction between a person's carefully accumulated malagan life and his now worthless secular life. His store of malagan begins to flourish, in effect a matured insurance policy. The consequences of his daily life now cause only divisive squabbling. His gardens may be partially cultivated, and now need tending by someone else. More significantly, the social polarization he had nurtured in recent years suddenly unravels. He is no longer the centre of his world. The networks that connected him to everyone else in the village are suddenly without a focus, without support; they need reweaving. In order to reweave society the old connections must first be broken and cleared away. This is the work of the cleaners.

By contrast to the collapse of his secular life upon death, a person's well-cultivated malagan life springs into action the moment he is dead. A man with a well developed malagan life would belong to at least two and more likely four or five sub-traditions of malagan, owning the *ciribor* (bone of pig) ownership rights to at least two of these. With this security of backing, his secular life dissolves away rapidly as his malagan life as an ancestor is constructed. His significance as a life force, as a producer, as a father and mother's brother, and as a big man, are now supplanted by his importance as a man of malagan, for it is now this aspect of his identity that is reconstructed and comes to first fruit with the burial ceremony where people sing their tribute to him through the songs of the malagan sub-traditions he owned. If a man owned the sub-traditions *Mandas*, *Kulepmu*, *Wawara*, and *Vuvil*, for example, then the songs and traditions used to bury

and commemorate him will be from those malagans. The graveyard he is to be buried in will be that belonging to the malagan for which he owned *ciribor*. If he owned *ciribor* for two sub-traditions, then the burial procession will begin at the graveyard of one sub-tradition and finish at the other. His after-life is completely taken in hand by malagan: operated by his affines, his clans-people, his successors; guided and controlled by a man very experienced in the operation of malagan ritual, a ritual master (*mi nguc*).

In the evening of his death, the first group of cleaners set out from the burial graveyard to make the first chop into the dead man's past life; they go to his garden and take out a selection of leaf from each crop growing there. This leaf is taken back to the village to be dumped in front of the *bo* death chair, where it would remain until the burial two days later. From this point on there is a systematic destruction of the person's past life.

The rapid erosion of a person's individual identity places him into a much more negotiable position as a disembodied and malaganized subclan ancestor. As such, a person's relationship to living society changes markedly. Rather than acting as agent for change and a nucleus in the subclan's struggle for social existence, he becomes a point in the ancestral constellation, a short-lived role used predominantly in claims for land-use right. The right of usufruct is granted to affines at marriage and, upon the extinction of a subclan, a closely related subclan will take over land use, rapidly forgetting the previous relation of ownership (cf. Kùchler 1987:248 for a similar example with the Kara). From circumstantial evidence gathered on Tabar it appears that ancestors important for the consolidation of land ownership for a subclan become deified into *tandar* (masalai in tok pisin). As an ancestor, a man's past position in real life becomes increasingly subject to manoeuvres, and the evidence becomes progressively harder to locate. Consequently very few Tabar people can nominate an ancestor more than three generations old, for at this point the ancestor has become a *tandar* or masalai, part of a non-negotiable series of locations within or around the clan's land holdings. The mechanism for this final transformation is at present unknown, but as malagan ceremonies are operated on Tabar to acknow-

ledge and consolidate change of land ownership from an extinct subclan to another closely related subclan, we would expect that masks are also used to effect this final transformation of ancestor to masalai.

Subversion of history and the use of terrorists on Tabar is a not part of a conscious attempt at revolutionizing the political system by destroying the evidence of people's pasts. Personal histories are deleted from secular life and supplanted by malagan activity where sculpture changes hands and pigs are killed so that the social structure can be realigned. In order to rid secular life of the dead person's presence, masked men remove the remaining evidence of his life — his personal history. In this way society is freed from the debris of a fallen tree and the forest can grow again.

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